Approaches for Enhancing Community Engagement in the Stewardship and Restoration of Large-scale Transboundary Ecosystems

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Abstract
Objective: At the Georgia Basin Ecosystem Initiative (GBEI) Steering Committee Meeting in May 2002, the need for greater community engagement in planning and implementation of action was emphasized.

As the Initiative aims at preserving and restoring a transboundary ecosystem, possible strategies for enhancing community engagement in such tasks across the international border will be examined.

General methodology: Mainly drawing upon European examples, alternative strategies will be presented and compared. An additional, experimental strategy, involving social learning through a cross-border pilot partnership of fieldworkers engaged in restoration and stewardship projects, will be laid out for discussion.

Results and significant conclusions: The feasibility, timeliness and acceptability, in the specific context of the Georgia Basin/Puget Sound region, of the different strategies presented, will be explored through an interactive discourse. Focus will be put on how best to ensure that Coast Salish Nations and Tribes play a key role in selecting and devising a preferred strategy and in setting the agenda for community-based action across the border.

Broader implications: The session will help establish the potential of the region to stand out as a showcase worldwide, combining social innovation and traditional ecological knowledge for the purpose of fostering stewardship and restoration of large-scale transboundary ecosystems.

Extended Abstract
Analysis of a sample of cases, where large-scale ecological entities, constituted by major watersheds, wetlands, sea basins or continuous mountain ranges, are crossed by one or several international borders[1], reveals that such cases can be divided into three distinct categories as far as approaches for enhancing community engagement in their stewardship and restoration is concerned:

1. Cases, where central and/or regional administrations organize public transboundary engagement under bilateral or multilateral agreements or action plans.
2. Cases, where community leaders and grass roots organizations drive public transboundary engagement, independently of any government-led strategy.
3. A combination of (2) and (3) where government-led public consultation processes regarding management of a transboundary ecosystem co-exist with citizen and grass root initiated transboundary coalitions targeting specific issues or limited geographic areas nested within the larger ecosystem.

The **Waddensea** constitutes a prototype of the first category: the trilateral Governmental Conference—the highest decision-making body on matters regarding collaborative measures and programs—decided in 2001 to set up structures and mechanisms enabling inhabitants and stakeholders of the region to have greater influence on the planning of trilateral policy and management and of the trilateral projects and actions. Consequently, a transboundary Forum and transboundary thematic groups were set up, bringing together key users, and notably those involved in agriculture, fisheries, industry and energy[2].

The **Eifel/Ardennes** exemplifies the second category as the driving forces behind community engagement in this region are committed individuals and local cultural and recreational grass root organizations, who see it as their main missions to promote the image of the shared ecosystem as an open and green space of key importance for the countries directly concerned as well as in a wider transnational framework and to develop a regional citizenship amongst its inhabitants[3].

The Pyrenees typifies the third category[4]: it involves a trilateral inter-governmental working group holding periodical hearings of community representatives while environmental organizations, firmly embedded in the communities on each side of the border, have formed a transboundary coalition, steered by a common council and guided by a Charter, to take on educational and awareness raising activities for the wider public but also to carry out watchdog functions in relations to major, cross-border infrastructure projects[5].

The studied cases show clear evidence of development of transboundary research, educational and awareness raising as well as planning capacity. Transboundary stewardship and restoration projects of relatively limited geographic scope can also be observed.[6] However, no conspicuous examples of community-based, operational capacity **at the scale of the shared ecosystem** were found.

Several presentations given during the 2003 Georgia Basin/Puget Sound Research Conference by Environment Canada officials[7] underscored the importance of nurturing and helping initiatives aggregate on the ground as a means to reverse persistent trends of decline and deterioration. Similarly, experience in Europe in the wider field of regional and spatial planning and territorial development shows that partnerships between practical projects addressing the same issues within broader transboundary spatial frameworks make it possible to enhance functional effectiveness and resource-efficiency of all partners through synergy and complementarity[8]. In the particular context of large-scale transboundary ecosystems, partnerships between field projects aimed at stewardship and restoration of terrestrial, freshwater, wetland, estuarine, shoreline or marine biotopes and habitats nested with the larger ecosystem, not to forget projects aimed at improving the quality of airsheds, seem even more promising as they may also be expected help re-establish connectivity, which is key to healthy and resilient ecosystems.

The question to be addressed is therefore what additional approach could be envisaged to turn community engagement into effective, self-sustaining capacity operating at the scale of the shared ecosystem. The proposition made here is that creating and nurturing a **transboundary community of practice**, linking together existing and emerging stewardship and restoration projects, may constitute such an approach. Although the concept of community of practice was initially developed in the context of business[9], it can be observed as a phenomenon in other cultural or historic contexts[10]. A community of practice typically displays the following characteristics:

- It is an **informal** group of people interacting and communicating regularly.
- In contrast to interest groups or purely geographically defined groups, it defines itself according to a **joint purpose or enterprise.**
- It exploits **mutual experiential learning** to consolidate and improve social practices and technical skills.
- It functions on the basis of **mutual commitment**, binding its members together in a social entity and developing **its own identity** across boundaries and differences of backgrounds and experience.
- Its development and sustainment over time depends largely on **internal leadership**.
- In the present context of stewardship and restoration of large-scale transboundary ecosystems, what would a community of practice look like?

Its members would be field workers actively involved in stewardship and restoration projects evenly distributed throughout the geographic scope of the shared ecosystem. Although from different backgrounds, experience and worldviews, these field workers would share a commitment to steward and restore ecological processes and functions while enhancing the well-being and livelihood of vulnerable communities. They would be interested to pool ideas and practices and keen to learn, explore and experiment.

Its **purpose** would be to increase the operational capacity of all its members through a collective search for ways to optimize available resources and to increase functional effectiveness of interventions carried out throughout the shared ecosystem as one, seamless field of operation.
Such a community of practice may reasonably be expected to bring the following **value added** as compared to the three approaches identified above:

- By enhancing collective experiential learning, it will foster new **practical capabilities and skills.**
- It will help **retain and keep alive various types of knowledge**.
- By combining and cross-fertilizing different experience and insights, it will spur **technical and social innovation and ingenuity.**
- It will help generate an **extended sense of identity and a collective sense of responsibilit**y for the shared ecosystem.
- It will help identify new opportunities for restoring ecological processes and functions **and** the well-being and livelihood of **vulnerable or marginalized communities.**

- It will help highlight **interdependencies and interconnectedne**ss between projects, largely overseen so far, thereby disclosing **new opportunities for resource-saving or resource-optimising synergy and complementarity.**
- It will allow identification of locations and configurations of projects throughout the shared ecosystem, which may **optimize functional effectiveness**[11].

All the cases reviewed share the following paradox: In spite of wide recognition of the potential benefits of joining forces in the face of a pressing need to reverse persistent worrying trends, transboundary communities of practice seem difficult to detect. While evidence shows that communities of practice tend to emerge **spontaneously** in response to a collectively felt need[12], this observation does not seem to apply in transboundary contexts. This may be explained by the greater complexity of such contexts, characterized as they are by administrative, cultural, sometimes linguistic differences, technical and physical obstacles, not to forget a psychological border effect or "cross-border ignorance" [13]. This complexity seems to call for some initial external intervention to activate communities of practice still in a state of latency. Evidence in Europe does indeed show that at the initial stage, cross-border collaborative processes in new fields of action reap considerable benefits from accompanying external assistance, both to design and monitor these processes and to optimise the learning they generate[14].

Given the experimental nature of the approach and the need to reap as much learning and practical outcomes as possible from its different phases of application, **action-research**[15] seems a particularly promising framework in which to anchor for external support for nurturing and supporting the formation of a transboundary community of practice. This framework, initially developed to reshape perspectives, to redesign structures and re-orient practices within social systems, presents the following advantages:

- It involves constant **cross-fertilization of systematic inquiry and critical reflection and field experimentation.**
- It creates **experiential learning** situations allowing participants to explore, discover, invent, question and take responsibility in the best Socratic tradition.
- It helps uncover advances—and possible setbacks—in understanding and practice—and allows **evaluation** of the coherence, credibility and wider relevance of the learning experiment[16].
- It seeks to bring immediate and concrete improvements to a given situation by helping **reduce blocks and barriers** (institutional as well as mental), which tend to conceal interconnections, synergy and complementarity, and mend fragmentation, grasp the bigger and wider picture and build bridges allowing more fruitful exchanges and better communication.
- It is pledging to **draw on all available types of insights and experience**, whether expert or not.
- It embraces an **emancipatory agen**da by encouraging the search for structures and practices for participatory and pluralistic setting of priorities and implementation by and for citizens recognizing each other as **free and equal.**

This framework would imply setting up a small team of independent action-researchers, combining good facilitation and observation skills and particular knowledge and experience in ecosystem stewardship and restoration. Mainly composed of locals from each side of the international border(s), this team would also include a friendly outsider with experience in cross border community development, bringing in a comparative perspective and ensuring links with other regions undergoing similar learning processes. Its role through the initial phase would be manifold:

- Provide opportunities for group formation at the **lowest possible transaction cost**.
- Make sure that the relevant people are included, securing **particular attention and weight to valuable marginalized voices**.
- Create a **favourable learning context.**
- Enhance **common understanding** about priorities, working methods, tools or spatial framework.
- Help keep **focus on chosen agenda and clarify options.**
- Foster member **initiative and ingenuity.**
- Assist in **recombining ideas and experience.**
- Help explore **interdependencies and interconnectedness,** synergies and complementarities between projects and practices as well as opportunities for joint action.|
- Underpin **self-assessment** and help retrieve **lessons and practical outcomes**.
- Establish **links to other relevant communities of practice** both within and outside the region concerned.

This team would invite a limited number of field workers with the appropriate profile and actively involved in stewardship and restoration projects on each side of the international border(s) to constitute a **pilot partnership** that would take part in an experimental learning and exploration process, spanning no more than 24 months, as the potential core of a transboundary community of practice.

The questions for discussion are the following:

1. To what extent would the proposed additional approach, aimed at enhancing transboundary community-based stewardship and restorative capacity, be useful in the context of the Georgia Basin/Puget Sound?
   Introduction to the discussion: This region seems to be an appropriate test case for exploring the feasibility and acceptability of this approach as it already displays a dynamic fabric of community and grass roots groups actively involved in stewardship and restorative projects on each side of the border. This fabric constitutes a potentially fertile breeding ground for a future transboundary community of practice[17].
2. Given current endeavours to set up worldwide networks of regions, including cross border ones—collectively seeking to take the lead and to learn from each other, notably with regard to civil society and community involvement in ecosystem stewardship and restoration[18], would there be an interest for the Georgia Basin/Puget Sound to join such endeavours as one, seamless ecological region? If so, what could its specific contribution be?
   Introduction to the discussion: There seems to be several good reasons for this region to become a partner in an emerging global network of pilot regions keen to compare lessons and insights learned from their respective experiences and experimentation:
   a. Its concern as to how to deal with rapid population growth without sacrificing ecosystem health nor the quality of life of its inhabitants makes it particularly relevant for other densely populated regions.
   b. As a socially vibrant and economically and technologically advanced region, it seems well suited to illustrate what practical implications community-driven pursuit of ecologically sound and socially inclusive objectives might have for the governance and economy of this type of region.
   c. At the same time, it seems well placed to explore how best to draw upon the traditional ecological knowledge and practices as well as traditional approaches to self-governance embedded in communities that are still keeping the memory of the shared ecosystem as one, undividable whole—in this case the Coast Salish Nations around the Salish Sea - and to enhance and combine these with cutting-edge technology and novel social structures. If the 'transboundary community of practice' approach were applied to this region, this would imply that representatives of the Coast Salish Nations would play a prominent role both within the supporting action-research team and within the pilot partnership to be set up.

The author of this paper, writing as an independent researcher, warmly invites interested readers to react and comment on this text and particularly on the two last questions as this would constitute a valuable first step in an on-going, interactive conversation. Any e-mail correspondence should be addressed to:
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Notes:

[1] The cases sampled include: (1) the Waddensea, a major marine wetland of prime importance as a fish nursery and a resting and breeding place for migratory fowl, shared by the Netherlands, Germany and Denmark, (2) the Eifel/Ardennes, a mountainous forest range playing a key role as a natural freshwater reservoir and green lung for the congested metropolitan areas of Northwest Europe and shared by France, Belgium, Luxemburg and Germany, (3) the Pyrenees, a mountain range of high biodiversity and crucial for generation of freshwater shared by France, Spain and Andorra, (4) the Bay of Fundy/Gulf of Maine and (5) the Georgia Basin/Puget Sound.

[2] http://cwss.www.de/

[3] A very active grass-roots organization is the International Youth Commission for the Eifel/Ardennes (source: http: //www.evea.de/kontakt.htm).

[4] The Bay of Fundy/Gulf of Maine and the GB/PS also appear to belong to this category.

[5] Cf. the page for " Le Conseil International Associatif pour la Protection des Pyrenees" (www.pyrenees-pyreneus.com/ ENVIR_ciapp-fr.htm).

[6] For example the 3-country park involving border regions in the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany and the Orca Pass International Stewardship Initiative in GB/PS.

[7] Marie Gauthier, Larry Hildebrand and Bruce Kay

[8] For more information on the first generation of transnational cooperation programs on regional and spatial planning, go to .the following website: http://europa.eu.int/comm./regional_policy/interreg3/inte2/inte2C.htm.

[9] Wenger, E., 1998, Communities of Practice: Learning as a Social System, *Systems Thinker*, June 1998 (source: http: //www.co-il.com/coil/knowledge-garden/cop/lss.shml) vis.12.03.99

[10] For instance in indigenous cultures or in the guilds of the Middle Ages.

[11] Klimas, C.V. and Peterson, D.L., 1996, Restoration Priorities for the Future: Science, Culture and Management **In:** Pearson, D.L. and C.V. Klimas, (ed.), *The Role of Restoration in Ecosystem Management*, Society for Ecological Restoration and Parks Canada, pp 216-219.

[12] Wenger, E., *op. cit*.

[13] Cohn. T.H, 1999, Cross-Border Travel in North America: the Challenge of US Section of 110 Legislation, *Canadian-American Public Policy*, **40**: p.16.

[14] Robert, J. and T. Stumm, March 2002, Lessons to be Learned from Project Implementation in the Framework of the INTERREG II C NWMA and IRMA Programs (Synthesis Report presented to the Monitoring Committee of the Northwest Europe Metropolitan Area in December 2002).

[15] Greenwood, D.J. and M. Levin, 1998, *Introduction to Action Research: Social Research for Social Change*, Sage Publications, 274 pp.

[16] Room, G., 1987, *Cross-National Innovation in Social Policy; European perspectives on the Evaluation of Action-Research,* St. Martin's Press - New York, pp. 38-50.

[17] Events such as the 2003 GB/PS Research Conference indicate that, provided appropriate enabling conditions are secured, a transboundary community of practice seems indeed ready to emerge in this region.

[18] One example is the global network, which 22 founding regions agreed to initiate at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg on 31st of August 2002. This network, which at the present stage includes regions from all five continents as well as four associations of regions, namely the Assembly of European Regions, the Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions, the Northern Forum and the Committee of the Regions of the European Union is aimed at promoting sustainable development at the regional or sub national level through interregional sharing experience and information and collaborative partnerships, notably to foster and support community-based sustainability initiatives in